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ABSTRACT

This article reports on an investigation of African American families' perceptions of their experiences in an after-school involvement program at two inner city schools, one public and one Catholic, in partnership with a university. A sociocultural-based program model was used to facilitate documentation of family studies and to prepare preservice teachers in working with inner-city families. Using a semistructured interview and secondary data sources, five conceptual categories were constructed to form the study's interpretive themes of families' perspectives of involvement: (1) traditional invitations for family involvement; (2) barriers to family involvement; (3) children's outcomes; (4) the family role; and (5) a caring community. Forty-two family members participated with their children in the program, and one-quarter of frequent participants were males. Findings indicate that prior to program implementation, families received bureaucratic invitations to school involvement and perceived similar reasons for other families' lack of involvement. After program implementation, families reported positive outcomes for their children's learning and a sense of efficacy in helping them as they became part of a family-school learning community. The computer usage was a motivational factor for families' participation. Findings were discussed in relationship to broadening notions of family involvement and working in partnership with families, schools, and a university. Theoretical and practical implications for families, schools, and universities are discussed. (Contains 45 references.) (SLD)

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AM I INVITED?: PERSPECTIVES OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT WITH TECHNOLOGY IN INNER-CITY SCHOOLS

Anastasia P. Samaras & Josephine C. Wilson

The Catholic University of America

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Address correspondence to the authors
The Catholic University of America
Department of Education
Washington, DC 20064

samaras@cua.edu
wilsonj@cua.edu

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES:

ANASTASIA P. SAMARAS is an Assistant Professor and Director of Teacher Education at The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. Her teaching, program development, and research interests focus on the sociocultural contexts in teacher preparation, self-study, and early childhood education.

JOSEPHINE C. WILSON is Coordinator of Field Experiences and Lecturer at The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. Her specializations and research include teacher preparation in urban schools, family literacy, and early childhood education.

AM I INVITED?: PERSPECTIVES OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT WITH TECHNOLOGY IN INNER-CITY SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT

This article reports on an investigation of African American families' perceptions of their experiences in an after-school involvement program at two inner city schools in partnership with a university. A sociocultural-based program model was utilized to facilitate documentation of family stories and to prepare preservice teachers in working with inner-city families. Using a semistructured interview and secondary data sources, five conceptual categories formed the study's interpretive themes of families' perspectives of involvement: (a) traditional invitations for family involvement, (b) barriers to family involvement, (c) children's outcomes, (d) the family role, and (e) a caring community. Findings indicated that prior to program implementation, families received bureaucratic invitations to school involvement and perceived similar reasons for other families' lack of involvement. After program implementation, families reported positive outcomes for their children's learning and a sense of efficacy in helping them as they became part of a family-school learning community. The computer usage was a motivational factor for families' participation. Findings were discussed in relationship to broadening notions of family involvement and working in partnership with families, schools, and a university. Theoretical and practical implications for families, schools, and universities are discussed.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate African American families' [1]perceptions of *First Teachers,* an after-school family involvement program, implemented in two inner-city schools; one public and one parochial. The program incorporated families telling, writing, and then typing stories on computers. Education faculty and students from the Catholic University of America

(CUA) served as program implementers and volunteers. Specifically, research objectives were to explore African Americans' families perceptions of: 1) the impact of their involvement on their children's academic performance, 2) the role of story and shared activity as a type of family-school involvement, and 3) the value of technology in their children's learning. This study also explored families' interaction and teaching strategies in a computer context, developing and maintaining school-university partnership programs, and training preservice teachers in a sociocultural-based family-school involvement model.

A Call to Action

Historically, the agenda for education in America has been responsive to national needs with tremendous political, social and economic demands placed on schools. Today's political forum, in both Republican and Democratic circles, revolves largely around three key concerns: 1) the breakdown of the American family, 2) the failure of public education, and 3) welfare reform. Politicians proselytize that one of the most crucial components towards the needed reform is parental involvement in children's education (Riley, 1995; Rodham Clinton, 1996).

In 1989, President Bush and a group of governors met to set a national agenda for school reform by the year 2000. Initially, the plan included six major goals which did not include parent involvement. Family and community involvement were later incorporated as the essential link in the educational reform process with a call for strong partnerships between schools and families (National Education Goals Panel, 1995). [2]

President Clinton launched an effort challenging parents to get involved early in their children's learning with schools creating neighborhood learning communities through organized before and after-school activities (*A Call to Action for American Education* , U. S. Department of Education, 1997) . During his 1996 presidential campaign, President Clinton announced his plan of putting a computer in every classroom. Computers can promote academic learning and connect families and

schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1994b) however, how families become a part of that plan is less clear. The National "Back to School" campaign (U.S. Department of Education, 1995) encourages schools to make use of technology and computers as a learning priority in schools and home in a family-school involvement partnership. Resources and funding for innovative methods with technology are problems for all schools, but especially for schools with high levels of poverty.

RELATED LITERATURE

A growing body of research supports the importance of parent involvement to children's school success (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; National Education Goals Report, 1995; Swap, 1992; U. S. Department of Education, 1994b). We know that families can play a key role in children's school achievement and success (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Hess & Holloway, 1984; Scott-Jones, 1984) and that parent involvement is linked to positive effects on students' learning (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). When parents have visibility and vitality in a school, teachers and parents come to know about each other's concerns and needs which promote the learning of students (Comer, 1988).

Early school effective researchers, such as Ron Edmonds and Larry Lezotte, did not include parental involvement as essential to school or child success partially because it was viewed as a fringe benefit; a variable that was difficult to manipulate (Bullard & Taylor, 1993). More recently, effective schools researchers have found that strong community support and involved parents are critical to schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1994b; 1995). Rodman Clinton (1996) notes that it is essential for the whole village to care about the well-being of families so children can thrive, yet reform efforts call for the personal responsibility and obligations of parents as the persons primarily responsible for ensuring their children are adequately prepared to compete in the American economy of the 21st century. Parents are their children's first teachers. Parental responsibility does not end when children begin school. Although there is much publicity and

research support about the need for parental involvement, schools still struggle in building partnerships with parents. There lies the paradox that voluminous amounts of research have not significantly changed practice.

There are multiple barriers to parents' involvement, particularly single parents with financial, educational, and resource limitations. Family background, conceptions of parent-teacher roles, and social class may affect families' interactions with schools (Lareau, 1989; Moles, 1993). Yap & Enoki (1995) have noted such factors as: narrow conceptualization and inappropriate attitudes of teachers and administrators about parental involvement, lack of teacher preparation, parental occupational limitations, and cultural characteristics. The social context of families' past social interactions with society and school, influences how and what families know about being involved with their children's education (Ogbu, 1985). Many families need assistance in knowing how they can take part in their children's learning. They need guidance in how to gain social and cultural capital so that they can become self-regulated decision makers and advocates for their children's learning. Their interests and talents remain untapped in multigenerational whirlpools of poverty and in a cycle of not knowing how to enter in their children's learning. This may be complicated by their own unmet safety and physical needs (Maslow, 1954).

All families however, even from the poorest communities, have assets despite their economic and social deficits. One of the greatest and accessible assets that all families have are their stories which root children's cultural identities. The transmission of cultural values through the oral tradition has been an essential component of African American families' lives and has served to build a sense of continuity, belonging, ethnicity, confirmation of self-worth, and documentation of their faith and resiliency (Hale, 1991).

Fueling the cycle of the miseducation about family involvement are teacher preparation programs that do little to broaden preservice teachers' knowledge and interaction skills with low-income families from inner-city schools. This encourages the new cadre of teachers to exit universities with more traditional conceptions of parent involvement and with little knowledge of

communities that are unlike their own (de Acosta, 1996; Turney, Eltis, Towler, & Wright, 1985). Individual attitudes, distrust, and misconceptions of families are often products of homes and are generated in historical relationships among cultures, races, class, and genders which can be problematic for preservice teachers from any race (Harris, 1997; Taylor & Wilson, 1997). Teachers are exasperated with parents' low attendance at parent-teacher conferences and lack of support in their children's education. A teacher commented to us: "There are so many places parents could take their children to learn about things in D.C. and they're free". "I get angry when parents are willing to buy their kindergarten child a graduation robe and new outfit, and when I ask them for money for a field trip they won't send it in".

Teacher education programs, as well as school systems that provide inservice education, typically disseminate lists of strategies or recipe type ideas for parent involvement which most often include activities that are tangentially related to children's school learning, e.g. assisting with classroom tasks, home-based activities, membership in PTA, etc. Winters (1990), calls this type of parent involvement as "participation" but not "involvement". It does not empower parents themselves or make them feel they can change or better their children's lives. Such participation is not grounded in a theory of interaction between families and children and does not acknowledge the essence of situated cognition or context-based learning. Furthermore, few programs are responsive to atypical family styles and do not include extended family members that may be actually caring for the child such as grandmother, aunt, older sister, brother, or a "significant other". We have come to believe that incorporating a field-based family-school involvement program with teacher education students is a formidable, but necessary challenge in teacher preparation (Samaras & Wilson, 1997). The Unit Accreditation Board of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has proposed a new indicator: I.H.4 "Field experiences, student teaching, and internship experiences include interaction with parents/families" (NCATE Reporter, 1997). Pupils bring their home life experiences and values to the classroom and knowledge of these experiences are valuable to teachers' planning and students' learning

(Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1996).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theoretical perspectives from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of teaching and learning served as the major research base for this research. According to Vygotsky, the development of one's knowledge is not a singular, self-constructive process and is one that is often developed with parents, peers, and teachers. Shared activity, or culturally-mediated instruction, is a means to facilitate a child's internalization of mental processes and the tools of culture such as language, narrative, problem-solving, and the use of technology (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Samaras, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Particularly for young children, writing is a complex cultural activity that can extend functions already served by speech and drawing (McLane, 1990). Families can serve to support, motivate and sustain children's ideas through writing. Storytelling is a powerful conduit in moving children's thinking to higher levels while binding people together in relationships and fostering a sense of community (Elliot, 1996; Kalfus & Van Der Schyff, 1996; McNamee, 1990).

This research also draws from Dewey's (1926) experiential, interest-driven approach by capitalizing on families' personal experiences. It utilizes Bruner's (1990) discussion on the dual nature of cultural psychology with stories as viable instruments for social negotiation, and incorporates Ogbu's (1978) work on the importance of validating the cultural identities of minority students and their families to enhance their self-esteem.

METHODS

THE SETTINGS

The settings for the research were two elementary schools which are in partnership arrangements with The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC [3] in which both researchers are employed (i.e. the university sends education students to the schools to tutor or

student teach and education professors assist with curriculum revision). This project utilized the schools' existing technical resources. Although there are many current curriculum revisions ongoing at both schools, it is our belief that long-term and lasting benefits in children's learning will take place only if families are a part of the reform process.

The first cohort school, Cityview Elementary School (pseudonym) is a public elementary school of 380 African American children in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. It is surrounded by and draws almost all of its population from two public housing complexes. Ninety-four percent of the children qualify for free or reduced lunch. It has a highly transient population and high rate of absenteeism. Unfortunately, it faces the same challenges of many urban public schools. It is a professional development school with the university, therefore faculty and education students are known by sight by its faculty and pupils. The school is home to an Apple Partnership grant which provided state-of-the-art technological equipment in four, early childhood classrooms. Research supports that there are higher levels of family involvement in the younger grades that decreases over the child's schooling (The National Education Goals Report, 1995). Thus, involving families early, when participation is greatest, is essential to building a strong program foundation. Students in grades kindergarten through third grade and their families were invited to participate in the weekly, one hour sessions.

The second cohort school, St. Luke's School, (pseudonym) is a long-standing Catholic school with ties to The Catholic University of America dating back to 1922. The school and its parish are located in an old, established community near the university. It has 250 children in prekindergarten through eighth grade. The racial composition of the school is 91% African American, 4% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Asian; 56% are non-Catholic, 44% Catholic, 25% parishioners, 58% D.C. residents, 42% Maryland residents. The children at St. Luke's come from variable socioeconomic levels and many come from multi-racial families. Students in grades kindergarten through third grade and their families were invited to participate in the program in weekly, one hour sessions.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

A crucial component of *First Teachers* is for families and children to work together sharing family histories through storytelling and literacy activities. The program also familiarizes children with computer applications to enhance their employment futures. Children show and tell their computer skills and teach their families about the technology, building children's sense of efficacy and self-confidence. Furthermore, families have opportunities to dialogue with their children's teachers and preservice teachers, become more familiar with children's class assignments, increase their own computer skills, and spend meaningful time with their children.

The four specific program goals of the project were: 1) to promote families' advocacy for their children's learning and their own through dialogue, writing, reading, and technology, 2) to facilitate the documentation of families' oral histories, 3) to provide opportunities for children to show their families what they were doing in school with computers, and 4) to connect preservice teachers with families enabling them to hear the family's voice about the environmental forces that have shaped families' lives, school experiences, and dreams for their children's education.

Families rotated through four different learning centers located at designated tables throughout a classroom equipped with a computer center. First they told their stories orally in the *Talking Center*. Second, they wrote their stories on paper in the *Writing Center*. The researchers provided optional story starter ideas, paper, and writing materials at the Writing Center table. Families and young children sat together at the tables. They talked about and wrote stories of their family creating a family album of their past. Third, children drew pictures about their stories in the *Drawing Center*. The Drawing Center was particularly important for younger children and siblings who had limited writing skills but could demonstrate their thinking through visual art. Fourth, families typed and printed their stories on a computer in the *Computer Center* with university faculty and students serving as assistants and computer trouble-shooters.

PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted February through June, 1996 at Cityview Elementary School. *Phase one* involved a parent needs assessment survey distributed through children's classrooms which asked parents if they wanted to come to the school to learn how children were using computers and their availability for participation. *Phase two* included several computer manipulation sessions where parents and children worked together in exploring the capabilities of the computer and how it was being used in the classroom. Children selected which programs they wanted to use and demonstrate to parents. *Phase three* involved cohorts of families and their children working together at computers where they co-authored family stories generated by families' interests.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Program implementation of *First Teachers* at Cityview Elementary School was conducted from September through December, 1996. The model was exported to St. Luke's School which took place from January through April, 1997. At each school, the principal investigators first met with the school principal to discuss the possibilities and logistics of offering the program. With the principal's support, the researchers provided a workshop and conducted meetings with school faculty and education students to explain the program and its implementation. Both school faculty and education students shadowed principal investigators, served as implementation assistants, and some advanced to implementation coordinators.

Participants were provided with a description of the use of the data and had an opportunity to ask questions about the research. The participants were asked to sign a consent form to be photographed with computer-generated quick-take cameras. The form also assured the confidentiality of research records and the absence of personal obligations. Names of families and students and other identifying characteristics of schools have been changed and coded to ensure external anonymity.

DATA SOURCES

An interview protocol, developed from the pilot study, was administered to query families' perceptions of involvement and is the major data source for analysis of this study. All interview data was later transcribed for analysis. Secondary data sources included: computer-documented family stories, children's drawings about their stories, computer-generated quick-take photographs, investigators' observations and field notes.

Family interviews. Interview questions were designed to probe for families' perceptions of 1) their past invitations and experiences of school involvement, 2) parental role and responsibility in school involvement, 3) children's reactions to the program, 4) family members' impressions of the program, e.g., children's learning, problems with the program, and suggestions. The families were told that the purpose of the interview was to learn about what they thought about the program and that their suggestions for improvement were valued by the researchers.

A total of forty-two family members participated with their children in the program and included mothers, fathers, boyfriends of mothers, a grandmother, a grandfather, older sisters, aunts, uncles, and an elderly man who was a neighbor and good friend to a child. One-quarter of the frequent participants were males. The researchers conducted one-on-one audio-taped, semi-structured interviews with family members lasting approximately 30 minutes after each program implementation. Case samplings of interviews were examined in this analysis.

Family albums. The underlying structure of the family album included stories of families: 1) personal experiences, 2) education-related life histories, and 3) expectations and goals for their children's education (adapted from McCaleb,1994). Children's work was kept in a file folder which children decorated. At the end of the program, families took home their family albums and received certificates of participation in the program, distributed at the schools' award assemblies.

DATA ANALYSIS

Case reporting was chosen for emic inquiry; a reconstruction of the respondents' constructions of their experiences in the program (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data analysis was conducted using first level coding, with memoing and marginal remarks, followed by pattern coding with code revisions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Perspectives held by families was the coding used to describe the phenomena and events that are depicted in transcribed interviews. Overarching themes or constructs served to cluster perceptions across participants, using the *R* analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984) with matrices used to organize data. Check-coding and case analysis meetings were held throughout the study.

FINDINGS

FAMILY PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAM

Themes generated from the family interview data were: 1) traditional invitations for family involvement, 2) barriers to family involvement, 3) children's outcomes, 4) the family role, and 5) a caring community.

Traditional invitations for family involvement. When asked how families had been invited to participate in the school in the past, families reported bureaucratic, traditional invitations, e.g. fund raising, school fairs, holiday helpers, attending field trips. One parent explained how she had been invited to volunteer at Cityview Elementary and stated:

> Oh they are always asking for volunteers in certain things, in a lot of activities in the school. I try to do my part. On a regular basis I volunteer to help, but anywhere else I can volunteer, I do that...Like they had a fund raiser, they had a dinner this past Friday and they needed volunteers...So they keep you informed of what's going on and what they need.

A grandmother's interview also indicated school involvement in traditional ways:

> Well, I think I've been on all the field trips. I help with the hot lunches. I help with most activities they have and the children's fair. I help [teacher] with Career Day. I am usually here when they have something important.

An aunt who participated in the program with five nieces reported:

> I do some volunteer work. I go on trips. I participate a lot in different holidays and just check on the kids.

A female parent from Cityview Elementary explained her involvement in the computer class, as well as traditional ways of involvement in her daughter's school:

> Well, I am involved by coming to the computer class. Also I try to attend PTA meetings and also I try to come in and talk with [teacher] and see if there is anything that I can do to help out.

All family members from both schools listed several different traditional school related activities they had been invited to participate in at their child's school.

Barriers to family involvement. Families saw other families' lack of involvement due largely to parents' disinterest and time constraints, and acknowledged the limitations of transportation, work, and opportunities for females to bond toward a common goal in a school setting.

One mother who volunteered on a regular basis at her daughter's school commented:

> I think a lot of times parents, some parents feel that it's the school's job to more or less teach and do everything. So, you don't get much home participation.

A grandmother from the St. Luke's School felt that time, transportation and unsafe communities are barriers to families school involvement, she stated:

> I think that you have to have the time to do it. I have more free time I guess then some people because I am retired now. I can spend more time up here with my grandchild as well as with other children and just work with them and let them know that you care.

When a mother was asked if she thought there were other barriers to families getting involved in school activities, she stated:

> Maybe transportation. Now days it's kind of unsafe being in the street after dark. In some communities maybe you wouldn't want to go out when it gets dark.

One parent from Cityview Elementary had some different views about the lack of parents' school

involvement:

> Well, my opinion is, I would say maybe pressures from life situations at home, no interest; just bad habits, not having had to come out and be involved in their children's education and volunteer their time, which we all have some type of time which we can volunteer our services in any way. A lot of people don't take the initiative.

A mother from St. Luke's School voiced her opinion on barriers to family involvement. She made recommendations for overcoming some of these barriers:

> ...I found that females in my age group and lower are not as easy to communicate with each other. They never really [have] been taught the closeness and bonding. And I think that a lot of activities don't have it because they don't know each other and they don't feel comfortable. And if they ever can get into a situation where the parents are together they can begin to meet, begin to mingle, and they won't feel as threatened by some of the things. And I am sure they would be more likely to be a participant. When I first came I had the same thing, I was a little shy. And once you get into it and you start meeting some of the parents then volunteering some of your time is not nearly as difficult. I think most of it is they [parents] are not approached where they feel, I don't want to say shy, but a little threatened by doing some of the things....If they can get the parents in to meet each other than I think they will have a lot more activities, a lot more participation.

Children's outcomes. Families reported many positive outcomes for their children in the program. First, families were attracted to the program because of the computer component and repeatedly commented, "the future is computers." They cited improvements in children's reading, spelling, writing, computer literacy, social skills, problem-solving and creativity. Family members felt that the program provided a structured, distraction-free environment conducive to learning. It promoted writing and other literacy-related activities which were sometimes extended at home. At St. Luke's School, some families wrote their stories at home together and brought them to school to type. Families spoke of positive affective outcomes for children, e.g. feeling good, proud, motivated, and successful. One parent stated that *First Teachers* helped her to understand her daughter better. She talked about her daughter becoming more independent:

> She use to be such a very shy child and programs like this bring her out. They give her encouragement. They make her feel that she can do a lot of things that she wouldn't attempt to do before. She say's "Oh I can do it myself." Before, she always needed me to help, but now she is beginning to stand on her own.

An aunt who participated in *First Teachers* with five of her nieces made the following observation:

> One thing I know is the reading part. A lot of children don't get involved in reading books and I figure that once they come to the computer they can type up what they thought about or what I helped them with and read it. The computers come a long ways in the future as far as jobs, high school and junior high school. So, I guess it is a good learning, a good place to start for learning about computers early.

She commented further about learning outcomes for the children:

> I know they are getting into writing a lot. At first they were like not really hooked on writing because they always like to read books because they not really of age as far as elementary, so they were just use to reading and pointing at pictures. Now, they are getting into writing and I help them out a lot.

One parent talked about positive outcomes for both she and her daughter from their involvement in the program:

> She feels great. She thinks she is a computer wiz. And I think she know a little more than I know, but that's ok. But she is learning a lot and she is helping me out. We are helping each other and we are working together. It is helping in a lot of ways, you know it is enhancing my spelling, even though I am a good speller, but it is making me a better [speller] and it's helping her in that way.

At St. Luke's School a mother shared a story about her daughter's enthusiasm for their involvement in the program. She commented:

> I go by my daughter's enthusiasm. She was sick today. They [school] called me and said she had chest pains, so she had some indigestion. I gave her some chocolate this morning that probably didn't agree with her. I had to take her home, but the only thing she said, "Mommy, this is computer day. Mommy I gotta go, mommy please, please let's go." And it was two o'clock. "It's time, it's time". And I said no [Mary] you have an hour to go. "No, mommy we are gonna be late." And this was like every five minutes, you know. And so that's a true example of what this program could do and it would do it for all the parents, but they just don't realize it or they just haven't been able to afford the time or they don't know how much it means to the child to do some of the things like that. So, that's what happened today.

Another mother talked about how the program helped in her interactions with her daughter and how the program setting helped her daughter to keep focused on learning activities.

> The setting here put us together. It helps me to mind my manners in dealing with her. But I think it focuses her still on the learning level more with the school atmosphere as opposed to the home because you got the T.V. and all of these distractions.

The family role. When asked how families saw their role in their children's education, families saw themselves as supportive of children's academic pursuits and wanted to be good role models and listeners. They felt a sense of efficacy in their helping behaviors and did not feel that it was only the school's job to teach children.

One mother at Cityview Elementary stated:

> I see my role in her education as being positive, always encouraging her to try even harder. She tries, but sometimes she gives up, but she knows she can do it, so I let her know, "you can do it" ... So, my role is being positive and just continue to encourage her and let her know that education is very important. That is the only way she is going to make it out here like the rest of us. She has to have her education otherwise it would be hard, very hard. So, I am just trying to be very encouraging and very positive as her mother and a role model. And then try to not be perfect, because I'm not, but just be the best that I can be because she watches me, so I try to be a good role model in her life.

A grandmother also felt it was her responsibility to teach her granddaughter the importance of a good education and encourage good attendance. She reported:

> Well, to teach her the importance of her education. [Teach her] to be punctual. She hates being late and absent. I think she had a perfect attendance for two years. She was absent half a day this year because she had to go to the doctor. But, that's important to her.

The family role through family stories: Family stories[4] poignantly depicted how families saw their role in teaching their children. The stories spoke of families' struggles and values, which encourage, rather than discourage, children to sacrifice, strive and move forward. Through story, families exemplified how the power of relationships can sustain us in difficult times. Below are a few examples:

> My grandmother told me that when I was a little baby I fell out of my basketnette [sic]. The basketnette fell on top of me because I was too heavy for it. I cried and cried. My daddy picked me up and my grandmother stood at the door with her hand over her mouth. My daddy hugged, patted, and kissed me and told me not to cry. I stopped crying. My daddy and my grandmother played with me. I was very happy.
>
> Black women are strong but need to come together as women. Please be the best you can be.

A child wrote: I remember the first time I had no friend and she like to play game [sic] and her name was Nikitra. She like to play all day. She was my baste [sic] friend I had naver [sic] had so all day we had fun. They [sic] end.

Families talked and wrote about the values of kindness, love, and belonging.

The T.V. show my mom and I watch together is Hercules. They are very good actors. Hercules cares about people in the show he's on. The people are very sensitive to each other. Hercules shares his feelings and is very caring with the people on the show.

I love my family. My family takes care of me very much. My family makes me happy because we share with each other. My friends love us too. I'm happy because my family loves me.

to T my daddy with love from Marisha and Thomas. HAPPY FATHERS DAY.

A mother writes:

My favorite trip as a child was when I was 9 years old. My first trip to Kings Dominion with my godfather. He was the best person or father to me.

Families felt it was important to hear about their children's interests. A kindergartner writes:

Learning I Like to learn Learning I do exercise in.

About school. It's fun. I can read and look at the page. I like to sing songs. I like to play. I don't like to make spelling words. I don't like to do homework.

My tutor took me to New York on the bus. I went inside the Statue of Liberty. We rode to the top in a huge elevator. When I looked down, everything looked very, very small. We rode on a boat to and from the Statue of Liberty. I took lots of pictures.

A six year old writes: The scariest thing that ever happened to me was candy man. I watch the movie on tape with my family. And the scariest time was when he shouted ra! ra! ra! and grabbed the girl [sic] neck.

The family role included depicting hope and faith in their children's futures. Children too spoke of looking forward to things. They discussed their wishes and dreams together through story. Note these stories written by mothers:

If I could have one wish, I wish the world could be a better place to live for everyone. I would start by making a lot of changes, first of all with myself and my family. I think that's what everyone should start with; their self and go from there. I would change racism. It would not exist. Everyone in America would be equal from the beginning of time. Every man and woman would have a job to provide for their family and live day to day without living in fear, live peace and hominy [sic]. For those who could not abide by

> these rules, will be ship to another country where they will be secluded and monitor their own behavior, until they learn to conduct their self in society as a kind human being.
>
> Jamia wishes to be a princess. I want to live long enough to see Jamika grow up, finish school, because I don't know how long I'm going to LIVE!!!

One child wrote and drew a story about "My own pink room":

> If I could have one wish, I would wish for a pink room. I would have pink hearts on my wall. I would have a pink bed with pink stuffed animals. The prettiest pink dresser you ever saw.

Another child writes:

> I want my birthday to come early. Because I want to get more presents. I want a baby doll. I would hug my parents. I would have steak and bread for dinner. Before we eat steak we sing "Happy Birthday". I would also have a birthday party with my class. So I could share cupcakes and juice with them.

Some used their writing in a reciprocal give and take pattern within the same story like in this discourse dance:

> Dear mom. I love you. Tamika I love you to [sic]. I really love you to. [sic] Thank you Boo [a nickname]. You are welcome.

Families often used capital letters to emphasize their feelings for each other:

> Dear Cheree Johnson. Momy love [sic] you so much. Mom I LOVE YOU TO. [sic] 04-22-96.

A third-grade girl writes:

> If I could have one wish. My wish is that it is peace in the world. No volence [sic] in the world. And I could be a mother, teacher and a famous baby Dr.

Her grandfather then replies:

> If I could have one wish it would be that LaCrisha would grow up to be a famous baby doctor because she loves children so much and she would be so dedicated to care and helping others to see that there would not be any child that was in need of medical care that would not get it.

A caring community. As several families and children worked together in the same setting, they appeared to develop a sense of community, observing other families who cared deeply about

their children's education and in what the Cityview Elementary school principal noted as "a community that has the appearance that no one cares here." They talked of how it was essential for families to work together, share ideas, network, and show their children that education is very important. We witnessed families bringing each other's children when a family member could not attend a session. A caring community was vividly expressed by a parent at St. Luke's School who commented:

> It's in work and in every aspect [of life]. If you get two or three groups or any kind of group together, they will not come together unless they can feel comfortable with the people [in the group]. The only way they can feel comfortable with the people is with some kind of interaction. And they haven't found anything yet to bring parents together. Families tried with certain things but they still just don't do it.

Parents saw the program as supportive in bringing parents together to work with their children. A parent at Cityview Elementary felt that parents need to work together for the success of the children, as well as the family-school collaboration. She noted:

> I sure do plan to continue and help in any way I could. I hope this program becomes a success; it is successful now. I hope it continues on being successful. We have to volunteer with the parents. We have to all work together. It has to be a networking thing.

An aunt from Cityview Elementary School stated:

> It [program] helped us get along better. Some things I might don't know, they probably can help me with some things, things they might not know I know I can help them with.

These families recognized the importance of working together, sharing, and caring for each other. They expressed deep concern for their children and for the continuation of the after-school program with their support and assistance. During the interviews, they freely offered the researchers excellent suggestions to ensure program growth and continuation such as:

> Maybe emphasize more notices. Maybe expand on the notices. Notices about what the program is about. Saying, it's creative writing you know.

Another mother suggested:

> Maybe next year yall [sic] can improve it to be an hour and a half to give the children more time to write their story and talk about what they wrote about once we printed it up on the computer and discuss how they feel about it.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to an area of importance but, in which there is minimal information: a sociocultural based family-school involvement model that invites and empowers families into the mainstream society. The program model offered new communication channels for building trust between families, schools, and universities, broadened family involvement beyond the normative mother-only participant, and provided an avenue for preservice teachers to experience the potential of collaboration with families in improving children's learning.

This research begins to identify what families see as important in a family-school involvement program and the role of technology in such a program. Young children from low-income families, began to locate and identify themselves in their own family histories through story and used the computer as a tool to document their past. With joint attentional focus between family members and their children, they were able to discuss, write, and edit stories together, which promoted communication and literacy skills. *First Teachers* provided opportunities for families, regardless of educational level, to mediate notions of family values, identity, culture, and lineage and to interact in a community with other families from the school. We observed that when many family members were teaching their children, they: 1) recruited them to the writing task, 2) constrained the task by assisting with story construction, writing elements, and typing, 3) supported, challenged, and tried to mediate children's frustration and independence, and 4) modeled solutions when necessary (see Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976 for a description of this Vygotskian scaffolding process). This is a rich area for further study.

The study further demonstrates how extended family members and significant others can play an important role in children's academic development. As educators and teachers, we need to move beyond traditional notions of parent involvement which offer families menial tasks and

instead search for activities which involve them in mediated and meaningful experiences with their children. Kinship relationships may serve as primary academic and social scaffolds for African American children living in urban areas and should be recognized and included in family-school involvement programs. Programmatic efforts that strengthen these relationships could have positive effects relative to children's academic success, behavior in school, and resilience to problems that plague urban neighborhoods. Family-school programs that connect the family to other families could be instrumental in building a sense of community.

Few teacher education programs offer formal training in collaborating with families (U. S. Department of Education, 1994b). We have attempted to prepare our preservice teachers to work and reflect in schooling situations that may differ substantially from their own schooling experiences, calling into question the moral and ethical perspectives in their role as teacher. The majority of our education students come from Caucasian, middle to upper-class backgrounds and attended private schools. This research project will be valuable to other researchers, teacher educators, and school systems involved in preservice and inservice education who strive towards "reciprocal enculturation, a process whereby new cultural patterns are acquired by both systems, family and school, as they develop and mature, and each can be endowed with new energy that changes its configuration". (Winters, 1990, p. 3). As we strive to educate all children, new ways to invite families to join in community with schools must be developed. Schools *and* universities must support families' efforts in assisting children to succeed in school.

A sociocultural based model of family interaction with inner-city, poor, minority populations has implications to other school systems. Programs that target multigenerational poverty, the rejuvenation of the family unit, and family networks, can help begin to build a better America for everyone. The consequences of disregarding the educational needs of all children may lead to broader societal dilemmas that can cripple a democratic structure, such as the level of the nation's economic competitiveness, increased monies allotted to poverty programs, and an expanding pool of a poorly educated, oppressed families (Bullard & Taylor, 1993; Giroux, 1990). This research

project is one small, but significant effort in addressing those concerns.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FAMILY-SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS

Given the positive effects of *First Teachers* implemented at Cityview Elementary School and St. Luke's School, the following recommendations are offered by the researchers and families involved in the program, to other educators and schools who are considering adopting such a program:

School Principals

*Begin the program by first meeting with the school principal, requesting the continuous and consistent support needed to implement and develop the program.

Teachers

*Provide convenient and frequent times for teachers to meet with program directors to clearly understand program goals, program implementation, schedule, and changes.

*Ask teachers often for their suggestions for program improvement.

*Underscore the importance of teachers' promotion and involvement for the program's success and the benefits in coming to know families.

Recruiting Families

* Effective recruiting involves:

(a) speaking to families one-on-one after school, outside the child's classroom, on the playground, or near high activity zones, such as in front of the school office or school doors

(b) advertising the program at the beginning of the school year through school newsletters, posters, parent-school meetings, etc.

(c) providing detailed, reader-friendly information about the program,

(d) asking participating families to help in the recruitment,

(e) asking teachers to remind children to tell their families about the program, posting and sending notices home

(f) asking children to write stories about the program and in a school newsletter, newspaper, and/or afternoon announcements.

*Children are the most active recruiters and motivate families to be involved.

Rapport and Trust -"Build it and they will come!"

*Establishing trust with families and teachers is a key to program success and continued participation.

*The program must begin slowly and build from a cohort of active participants.

* For younger children, use the child's own classroom not a central computer lab which hinders families' comfort zones, trust, and involvement with their child's teacher.

*The computer manipulation phase helped build rapport and establish trust between families and researchers.

*In the computer manipulation phase, suggest a show and tell format between the child and family member, without researcher input. This allows families to have private time together, diminishes problems in exposing families' low literacy levels, and keeps researchers at a safe but available distance.

Participation:

*Tuesdays and Thursdays are high participation days. Mondays and Fridays are not.

*Be flexible with time permitting families to arrive and depart as their schedules permit.

*Extend time and days offered as participation increases. Depending on resources, extend to upper classes with teacher involvement from those classes.

*Don't feel compelled to use extrinsic rewards to entice family participation. Learning and caring are rewards.

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NOTES

1. We have designed a program for family, and not just parental involvement. Children are often

cared for by significant others, including grandparents, cousins, and close friends. By including extended family members, children have alternative and additional participation interactions that include connections in the community. A greater number of participants may thus impact children's learning.

2. The National Education Goal #8 states: "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children". One of the objectives of Goal 8 is that: "Every state will develop policies to assist local schools and local educational agencies to establish programs for increasing partnerships that respond to the varying needs of parents and the home, including parents of children who are disadvantaged or bilingual, or parents of children with disabilities" (National Education Goals Panel, 1995, p. 63)

3. We thank The Catholic University of America, Department of Education and the Laboratory for Student Success, Washington, DC, CRES for support in this research project.

4. We made the decision not to correct family spelling errors, unless they asked for correct spelling, to protect their fluidity of thought and expression through writing and in a similar vein to those who work with whole language programs.